

THE FEAR OF GOD.

A SERMON:

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“F E A R G O D.”

1st Peter, 2nd chapter, 17th verse.

I want to say, as an introduction to this sermon, that no writer or speaker in the Bible begins his revelation by trying, first of all, to prove that there is a God. In no part of the Bible is such proof ever attempted. These men appear to believe that the question is settled in some other way than by reasoning; or they feel that trying to prove the being of God is a lower thing than that which they are sent to do; or they are so filled with a great sense of his presence, that they do not believe it possible for a sensible man to doubt about his being, any more than to doubt about the sunlight on a summer's day—living in a focus of belief, like that man who, brought before the parliament of Tolouse, on the charge of atheism, lifted a straw from the ground and holding it up before his accusers, said: “this straw compels me to believe that there is a God.” But while these men all believe that there is a God, they disagree very widely about his nature and character, and how he is related to man. To one he is a terror and perplexity—to another a supreme love; to one a power beyond all power—to another a limited, struggling principle; to one a grim Eastern despot, to another a forgiving father—his face beaming

with love to this man, but to that man, black with vindictive vengeance. A great deal of the trouble that men come to in trying to reconcile these things as they are found in the Bible, lies in their utter antagonism, and they can never be reconciled for that reason: therefore, we can only take them as we find them, and test them by the truth itself. I intend to do this as far as I am able, in the discussion of that character of God, by which we are bidden to *fear* him. I think there are some thoughts of the fear of God, that we may well ponder. I propose to name some hurtful and some useful fears of God common among men to-day, and to point out their value in the human life.

I. There is, first of all, a fear of God which to me appears to be a reproduction, measure, or color of the national life; different as the nations differ. I believe it is impossible to bring a Frenchman and a German, or a Scotchman and an Irishman, or any two men that reach back into a radical difference of race, to regard God in the same way. Indeed we see this difference in two children of the same family. One child will rebel and take the penalty, snap his fingers and do it again; while another will tremble and shrink and fear. One will say prayers and brood over those mysterious promptings of the soul that seem like the audible whispers of angels to some children; while another will appear to be shut altogether out of this heaven, reveling in the fresh new life of the present with a wealth of enjoyment past all telling—"of the earth, earthy." So there are nations that are lightsome, careless, earthy, objective; and nations that are deep, stern,

solemn, subjective ; and the national nature colors the great central idea of God.

Where the father in the home is a fear, the God above is a fear. Where the father is careless, light-hearted, easily bought off, blending laughter and tears, smiles and frowns, a kiss and a blow, there the Holy Mother can turn the tides of fate, and the Friar make a good thing, out of what to a deeper-hearted people is the dreadful, steady, immaculate justice. The Frenchman who could not stay to morning mass, but left his card upon the altar, flashed a light across the world that revealed the real texture of the French soul, as vividly as you shall see it, if you watch for a year in the church of the Madeline, in Paris. And when the Scotchman went away from the kirk for the first time in his life, to hear an Episcopal service, in which a fine organ played a prominent part, and said, as he came away, "O, it's verra bonnie, but it's an awfu' way of spending the Sabbath," he touched the deep, stern Scottish character, that, as some one has said, "delights to praise the Lord by singing infinitely out of tune;" better than it could be touched in a volume of disquisition.

So, friends, in a broad national way we take the thing that is nearest us to touch the infinite.

The glass through which we see God is darkened by our own breath. Some shadow of the dark or bright we cast of our own free will. But more than all that—is this primitive, mysterious shadow of the race, the shadow cast by blood, and climate, and circumstance, determining for all men, save, it may be, one in a thousand, whether their Supreme shall be revealed in the thunders of Sinai, or the

sorrows of Olivet, or the glories of Zion—a power that waits on our birth to take us up and mould us, and which smiles to hear us say, “what I will be I will.” For as you may find the Soldanella Alpina piercing through the snows upon the lower Alps, leaning its frail purple blossom over the fearful icy clefts, and the Victoria Regia in the hot lagoons of the South, opening her vast shining petals to glisten in the sun, but never the great Lily on the mountain or the Blue Bell in the Lake; so the idea of God is moulded more or less by the great ranges of the race—the intimate life blood of the country and the providence.

“The Ethiop’s God has Ethiop’s lips,
Black cheek and woolly hair,
And the Grecian God a Grecian face,
As keen-eyed, cold and fair.”

II. But in our own nation where so many nativities centre, the idea of God and the consequent fear of God differ very greatly. And I have thought that it might be of use to you, that I should note some forms of that fear as it exists all about us, and tell you what I think is a false and degrading, then what is a true and elevating fear of God, for us here, and to-day.

The first and lowest form is a fear of God as a jailor and executioner, who stands and waits until that sure detective, Death, shall hunt the criminal down and bring him into court; (where, by the way, there is no jury—a thing that certainly would not be omitted if these Western nations had written the Bible), and where really without trial—for his condemnation is a foregone conclusion—he is turned into the despair and torment of the lost. This is the low, coarse, hell-fire fear.

The fear described in a quotation that every preacher of this school can repeat to you more readily than he can repeat the beatitudes, and that is sure to find a place in the revival season, which indeed would be incomplete without it. The writer is describing a death bed, and tells you—

“In that dread moment, how the frantic soul
Raves round the walls of her clay tenement,
Runs to each avenue, and shrieks for help,
But shrieks in vain!—how wishfully she looks
On all she’s leaving, now no longer her’s!
A little longer, yet a little longer,
O might she stay to wash away her stains,
And fit her for her passage!
Her very eyes weep blood, and every groan
She heaves is big with horror! but the foe,
Like a staunch murderer steady to his purpose,
Pursues her close through every lane of life,
Nor misses once the track, but presses on;
Till, forced at last to the tremendous verge,
At once she sinks to everlasting ruin.” .

Now if you can bring a man to believe this, and to believe that God is to this dreadful penalty, what the soul is to the body, what the burning is to the fire, the very life of the eternal torture; replying, never, never, never, to every cry out of the pit of, “O, when will this agony be over,” then you have a fear of God in that man, beside which the fear of a slave toward a cruel driver is a pleasant, frisky thing, and such a fear when it strikes root in a man can have but one of two results. It places him in a bitter, hopeless, blasphemous atheism, such as you often find in isolated communities that have heard only these dreadful teachers, or it forces him into a slavish, crouching, abject submission, where every free and noble aspiration

is lost in the one great hunger to be on good terms with such a dreadful master. The Pagan on this plane of belief is wiser than the Christian. He says boldly that the doer of this is the *evil* spirit, and so he tries to be on good terms with him. But wherever such a fear has a real place in the soul of man or woman, African, Indian or Saxon, in that soul the love of God, or even a true fear of God, is utterly out of the question. It destroys every fair blossom of the soul, it leaves nothing to ripen—nothing beautiful even to live.

III. Then to the eye of the resolute christian hinker, who dare not, as Coleridge has said, "love even christianity better than the truth, lest he shall come to love his own sect better than christianity, and at last himself better than all," there is another form of the fear of God, not the best by far, but far better than this utterly slavish fear. I mean that in which God becomes the embodiment of pure bargain, exacting from us to the uttermost penny, or the uttermost quivering nerve, whatever is due—no more, no less. Here God appears with the guards and sanctities of the law about him, self-imposed and self-respected. The man need not contract the debt if it does not please him, but if he does contract it, he must pay, or another must pay for him. Then the son of the great creditor gives his own body to the knife, and bears the intolerable agony instead of the debtor. Now there is a touch of sublimity in this conception. I do not wonder that Paul, standing where he did, should be so filled with enthusiasm by it, and should run all over the world to tell it with strong crying and tears. To Paul, educated in the belief that a sacrifice was

imperative, this was a wonderful revelation. The awful debt paid—paid by the Son in the gift of his life! And to-day this form of the fear of God, even where it makes the man into a wretched, shiftless debtor and God into a stern creditor, yet with such infinite deeps of tenderness in his heart that he will give his own Son for us all, creates a far nobler issue than that in which Antonio must quiver in agony forever, if for no sin of his own, then for a sin contracted by his remotest ancestor. There is that in this better idea, which has carried a wonderful weight with it,—such a fear has its own touch of tender reverence. Convince a man that this is true, and he will be awe-stricken and inspired to some fearful love. The life and death that hangs on such conditions must be of vast importance, and a God at once so relentless and so merciful cannot be slighted.

Yet when we come to question the system, it will not stand. The moment you open the idea with the master key of the Fatherhood of God, you begin to see that it cannot be true. It is the father punishing the brother who is innocent, for the brother who is guilty. And you cannot help seeing that however willing the brother may be to bear, it is against the nature of true greatness in the father to inflict the penalty. It is no more *right* to do so, than it was right to punish the French page for the fault of the French prince. If you admit the principle, you do so at the expense of the clearest ideas of justice that are found in your own soul, and that guide you in every other decision. Either the doctrine must be wrong in some radical way, or the ideas that are right in everything beside, are wrong in this. If it was right that Christ should bear your sins in

his own body on the tree, according to the common interpretation of that doctrine, it will be right for you to punish the elder child in your home the next time the younger breaks into some mad freak of temper. Besides, this doing wrong with the sure conviction that some one must suffer for it, and then crouching down behind another while he bears the blow—this running into a debt that you are sure another will have to pay—this lying on the shady side of the barn all through the summer, because you know you can beg enough corn to put you through the winter, from the man who toils all day in the hot sun, and who loves you so well, good merciful man that he is, that you are sure he will not let you starve—does *not* appear to me to be the best way to promote a stout, deep, steady, personal manliness. If you take the principle out of the realm of religious ideas, and bring it into common life; as a rule, it makes a man small, tricky, and vicious. Then this unlimited promise to pay, creates all sorts of unfair and unsound debts. When the common run of men believe that they can have all they ask for, they are not likely to be particular about pennies. Our government is cheated every day in the exact ratio of the confidence of depraved rogues that they can get their claims pulled through, and the better the man to indorse the claim, the more they will put down. If a good man will say this is all right when it is all wrong, they will slide in another cypher with perfect assurance. Now meet this doctrine of vicarious payment fairly, consider it as if you heard it for the first time. If you will not be afraid of polarized words and ideas, you will see that *this*

must be the result to most men of even the advanced doctrine—that God is an embodiment of justice or bargain, demanding strict payment, but willing to accept any gold if it be gold. It breaks up the inner fastnesses of the man's soul, by pushing his ultimate responsibility upon another. It makes God fearful not because I owe him, but because he will be sure to make his claim good somewhere. It makes a man false in the precise measure of his own essential meanness. So that it was perfectly natural for that wretched man in Philadelphia to plot all the week how to cheat his bank out of unlimited thousands, and then on the Sunday go to Girard College and snuffle to the boys, "now, my young friends, I have come here to-day to try if I can save one soul," because saving a soul and standing square in absolute personal righteousness is by such doctrine not essentially the same thing. In a word, it uncentres a man. It lowers lofty standards so that you need not climb up painfully to reach them, but just slide along on the dead level and you are there. It fills the world with churches, but the church with worldliness—the result is

"God and the world we worship both together,
Draw not our laws to him, but his to ours,
Untrue to both, so prosperous in neither,
A chilling summer bringing barren flowers."

"So then we must
Unwise in our distracted interests be;
Strangers to God and true humanity."
"Too good for great things, and too great for good,
Letting I dare not wait upon I would."

IV. But a far higher fear of God is to fear him as we fear the surgeon, who *must* cut out some dreadful gangrene in order to save the life. Such a

fear as this really touches the outskirts of love—it is love and fear blended. When I went to Fort Donelson to nurse our wounded men, it was my good fortune to be the personal attendant of a gentleman whose skill as a surgeon was only equalled by the wonderfully deep loving tenderness of his heart, as it thrilled in every tone of his voice and every touch of his hand.* And it all comes up before me now, how he would come to the men, fearfully mangled as they were, and how the nerve would shrink and creep, and how with a wise, hard, steady skill he would cut to save life; forcing back tears of pity only that he might keep his eye clear for the delicate duty; speaking low words of cheer in tones heavy with tenderness; then when all was over, and the poor fellows, fainting with pain, knew that all was done that could be done, and done only with a severity whose touch was love, how they would look after the man as he went away, sending unspoken benedictions to attend him. Now a fear like this is almost the loftiest fear of God that has come to the human soul. Here we find ourselves among all sorts of depravities. Sins that are as certainly shattering even to the body as the splint of a shell or a rifle-bullet, hit thousands of our fellows on every side. *They hit us.* We can all count some friend or kinsman, who has been killed by sin as surely as if he had been shot down, and it may be not one of us, can look back from the stand point of forty years, and say, I am willing to take the unalterable and

* My position as nurse for this gentleman, Dr. R. L. REA, of this city, gave me such insight as inspired this poor tribute to his worth and goodness, He was one of a noble band, all full of the same spirit. I am glad to say such words of them, and all the more that I am sure they never expected to hear them.

eternal consequence of all my deeds done to man and woman, ever since I was a man. And this consciousness of something wrong in us, this sight of something wrong about us, makes havoc of the peace of the soul; we feel in our own life a thread of the common cancer.

Again, not sin only, but death is fearful to many of us; we shrink from the touch of God, as the man shrinks from the surgeon's knife. It is doubtless some pain to enter into *any* life, and that is why we shrink from it. It must be some pain to the worm in the water, to strip away the dear old shell in which it has lived for seventy years, (the seventy years of a worm,) to pierce out into the air and spread its wings, though the next moment it shall exult and sing as it floats in the wonderful new world, with the rich color, and the sunshine, and the unbounded gladness. Now there is this intuition of our intimate dependence on God in every soul. Are we in sin—God must help us out of it finally, in some quick painful way, as the surgeon helps the sufferer. Our suffering appeals at once to his pity, his mercy and his love. Are we in life, through him, we must brave the great change of our being, and begin to live again in some wonderful new way. So comes this fear of God—at once a shrinking and a clinging, inevitable and fearful. And this is about as far as most liberal christians go; they accept this life as a mystery of trouble, and expect that God who has certainly brought them into it, will certainly help them through it; so with a touch of terror, as a woman would trust herself in a frail boat on our lake because she believed in the captain, though the waters were turbulent and the sky dark, we

trust ourselves to God, and bear the peril as bravely as we can—not always quite sure that we shall win through, yet as the life deepens, watching with ever fresh trust the pilot at the helm, sure, as the days wear on, that the master knows best what to do, and that we have only to bear the burden, meet the inevitable lot, and trust to the end.

V. Then, finally, there is a fear of God which is more of love than fear, a fear that has *no* torment. There is an inspiration by which our duties rise up before us vested in a nobleness like that which touches the landscape for a great painter. The true artist works ever with a touch of fear. He stands at his task, his heart trembling with the great pulses of his conception. Carefully, fearfully, as if his soul were to be saved by it, (as indeed in some measure it will be,) he tries to bring out the mystery of truth and beauty. There is a deep gladness and a deep fear as, line by line, touching and retouching with infinite care, he perfects at last to the visible sight the vision of beauty that was in him. And he is fearful exactly as he sees the perfection of the thing he is trying to embody. A dauber has far less fear than Church, when he paints Niagara. Now believe me, God hides some ideal in every human soul. At some time in our life we feel a trembling, fearful longing to do some good thing. Life finds its noblest spring of excellence in this hidden impulse to do our best. There is a time when we are not content to be such merchants, or doctors, or lawyers as we see on the dead level or below it. The woman longs to glorify her womanhood as sister, wife or mother. I say, in the heart of us all, there is this higher thought of life struggling for a realization. All at some time cry, “not that I have already attained or

am already perfect," and *then* the fierce conflict of life begins. The tempter tells me that if I try to be an ideal merchant, or lawyer, or doctor, I shall go under; if it is a rule to mix inferior wheat and call it No. 1—to pull a rogue through in spite of justice, when all the world knows he is a rogue—to keep a patient lingering a little for an extra fee—then I must do it, or I am not fit for this world. I must go where the wheat is all pure and plump, and the judge has a clean calendar, and the inhabitants never say I am sick. If the woman will not dress, and dance over ground enough to kill her if she had to walk it doing good, in order to secure some darling match for herself or daughter, then she must go where there is neither marrying nor giving in marriage. The young man must see life, or be a spoon. Friends, that is the devil—the temptation in the wilderness, that every soul must meet and faint and stagger under, in some form or other. But here, on the other side, is God—God standing silently at the door all day long—God whispering to the soul, that to be pure and true is to succeed in life, and whatever we get short of that will burn up like stubble, though the whole world try to save it. Now here is the fear of God that is loftiest of all. It comes to youth and maiden at the portals of life, to make them beautiful in all sweet sunny humanities, yet to keep them pure as the angels. It comes to the wedded man and wife whose little children are beginning to trouble the home, just as the angel troubled the waters in the ancient pool, that the home may be a fountain of healing for the hurts and bruises of the world, and it helps them to look into that future when those little pattering feet shall tramp strong and steady in the ranks of life,

those voices breathe out comfort and inspiration for fainting souls, and those hands, now so restless with electric mischief, grow skillful in the achievements of the age. It whispers how it will lead you and help you if you will but keep your soul open to it; how you shall be able to bring those children into the great ranks of God's holiest and best, as you take heed to that monitor. It comes to the aged, and brings sounds from over that golden sea beyond which abides their home. It tells them to listen to no tempter that would make the grave the end of all, but to keep an open tremulous ear for the whispers that ever come from the upper world when the turmoil of life is over and the pilgrim rests for a season. O, friends, it is to every man and woman the still small voice, whispering whatever at that moment we *must* hear if we will live. Not shouting, but *whispering*, so that we must listen with a loving fear lest we miss the accent; not repeating louder for our heedlessness, but whispering, so that we must fear lest we miss the word. God with us, not as an Eastern despot, or a stern bargainer, or a painful helper, but a pleading love. Not the thunder, beating in terrific reverberations down the peaks of Sinai, but that gentle voice on the mount of the beatitudes, crying, "Blessed are the poor—blessed are the meek—blessed are the merciful—blessed are the mourners—blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."